

Victories – Had one lately?

By Polly Poskin

I wrote the article reprinted below in 1982. I found it in a box of “stuff and miscellaneous” this spring as I helped my sisters and brothers clean out my parents’ house. Several things have changed since 1982. For one, I now know that 35 is not mid-life. I no longer play competitive soccer or softball. In fact, my legs don’t let me play soccer for fun. And girls’ and women’s sports are more mainstream than I ever dreamed they would be. But some things never change. Indeed, feminists need victories these days and the ones we need sound eerily like the ones that I thought we needed in 1982. It’s 2004 and the crisis looms, mid-life or otherwise.

I am thinking about having a mid-life crisis. It’s about winning and losing. I hope that by choosing to have one, I can control the outcome. I have been a sports enthusiast all of my life. I can remember when Al Kaline did not receive the MVP award because it was his rookie year (rookies just did not receive the MVP award) despite the fact that he out-hit, out-ran and out-played everyone else. That was Al’s best year in an illustrious career, and he never did win the MVP. I recall that one of the biggest thrills of my young life was when my fifth grade boyfriend took me to see the White Sox play in Comiskey Park and Minnie Minoso, my true boyfriend, hit the game-winning homer.

When I wasn’t collecting and trading baseball cards or reading the sports section or fantasizing about being the first female manager of a major league baseball team, I spent a lot of time throwing a rubber ball against the brick school house next to my parents’ house. When I got bored with playing catch with myself, I shot free throws into a metal basket-shaped structure that sat on top of a metal pole anchored to a metal stand on the ground.

My athletic career never got much further than the school yard. I once competed in a track meet sponsored by the Illinois Jaycees and Illinois Youth Commission, but there was no such thing as organized girl’s sports in Illinois. Any girl who was “the best player we boys ever had” watched her athletic dreams come to an end in the sixth grade. That is when the boys were organized into teams and played other schools and girls became the best cheerleaders (or fans) those boys ever had.

College awakened me to the fact that some girls had been coached, trained and groomed to be athletes. But if you had not received any of that attention by the time you went to college, you had a rough time learning a zone defense. About the time I completed graduate school, two wonderful events occurred in the sports world for women: Title IX and Billie Jean King. Title IX said that if your school received federal funding, it could not discriminate in its programs and policies between male and female students. This opened the door for girls’ sports

programs outfitted with uniforms, coaches and competitive schedules. And Billie Jean King revolutionized professional women's sports by organizing female tennis players. They were serious about competing, winning and improving. They struggled long and hard to be regarded as top-notch athletes deserving of excellent playing facilities, press coverage, comfortable accommodations and big winnings – inspiring women in other sports to promote and champion their skills.

All of this brings me to my mid-life crisis. I'm still a sports enthusiast. I read the sports page, get excited about the state basketball tournament and actually play more sports than ever. The Women's Alliance plays competitive soccer and softball; we played basketball for two seasons. Most of us have not had formal coaching or training; we're graduates of the Sandlot school. All of us are kind-hearted and mellow women. Winning has not been the primary motivation for playing. In fact, we have often talked about the higher values of sports such as teamwork, physical conditioning and comradarie.

But lately I have been thinking about winning. After all, I thought Al Kaline should have won the MVP; I trembled I was so happy when Minnie Minoso hit the game-winning homer; and I always wanted R-T high school to be the conference champions. So why have I downplayed the importance of the Women's Alliance soccer team being the best soccer team in Springfield? Does it have something to do with the countless hours of playing catch with one's self, shooting free throws "for the fun of it," cheerleading instead of competing? Perhaps it is because I was born too soon for Title IX benefits. The reasons, I've decided, are many and undeserving of blame.

What is important is that winning is becoming important. The stakes are getting higher. Feminists need victories these days. We need three more for an ERA. We need countless ones to stave off the anti-choice fanatics. We need them to win back affirmative action, to hold onto Title IX, to keep rape crisis centers and shelters for battered women open, to insure lesbian rights, to expand day care, to stop nuclear war. Winning a soccer game might turn this mid-life crisis into an inspiration. It's worth a try.

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